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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study as an illustration of the need to probe issues and assumptions that arise when outsider staff developers work with teachers from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. After tracing the historical and sociopolitical context of urban school reform, the paper examines the author/educator's experience of developing relationships and acting as a mentor to African American teachers in early childhood classrooms in an urban school. Using the framework of African American cultural values and communication codes, the author/educator reexamines and reconsiders her own beliefs and behaviors to better understand problematic staff development situations as seen from different perspectives. The case study illustrates challenges that face outsider staff developers in becoming aware of their own biases in forming relationships and communicating with different ethnic groups. The paper reinterprets specific early childhood practices, such as constructivist learning, caring, and choice, through a comparison of European and African American feminist values and assumptions. It presents implications for differentiating staff development practices to fit the individual, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts of schools and teachers. (Contains 38 references.) (Author/BT)

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Insider/Outsider Relationships:

Reconsidering Outsider Staff Development

Through the Prism of Race, Class, and Culture

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study of the author as an illustration of the need to probe issues and assumptions that arise when outsider staff developers work with teachers from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. After tracing the historical and sociopolitical context of urban school reform, the author examines her experience of developing relationships and acting as a mentor to African American teachers in early childhood classrooms in an urban school. Using the framework of African American cultural values and communication codes, the author reexamines and reconsiders her own beliefs and behaviors in order to better understand problematic staff development situations as seen from different perspectives. The case study illustrates challenges that face outsider staff developers in becoming aware of their own biases in forming relationships and communicating with different ethnic groups. Specific early childhood practices, such as constructivist learning, caring, and choice, are reinterpreted through a comparison of European American and African American feminist values and assumptions. Implications for differentiating staff development practices to fit the individual, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts of schools and teachers are presented.

Insider/Outsider Relationships:
Reconsidering Outsider Staff Development
Through the Prism of Race, Class, and Culture

Stein, Smith, and Silver (1999) call for a new paradigm of staff development, one that relies on deeper engagement with teachers, and includes immersion in the actual settings of school. They suggest that knowledge of the multiple contexts of the schools – and of the teachers themselves-- is essential to effect any long-term change or transformation of teaching practice. I was involved in a recent and ongoing staff development project in a large inner city school district, which employed a staff development model that was based on developing mentoring relationships with individual teachers in their school settings. Looking back on the development of these relationships, I have become increasingly aware of the complexity of the multiple contexts Stein et al. discuss: the context I brought as an outside staff developer, and the contexts of the teachers and their teaching work within a specific school and community. In particular, I am trying to uncover for myself what it meant to be a white outsider providing staff development to African American teachers in a predominantly African American community. I realize now that issues of culture and race, class, equity and access were unacknowledged, but constant, participants in my work. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on my changing awareness of these issues in more detail, examining assumptions that guided my staff development work, with an attempt to reveal some of the complex personal and socio-political contexts we traverse when we work across cultural, racial, and class boundaries.

It is my first day as a staff developer in Carver School and I have spent time with three teachers in their classrooms. Now Aleisha stands close to me at the end of the day as all the children are getting ready to go home.

"You married?" she asks.

"Yes."

"You married to a black man?"

"No."

"You married to someone you color?"

"Yes"

Aleisha is 4, clearly one of the youngest in this kindergarten class. She stands sturdily in a washed loose cotton dress, lots of pigtails in her hair. It is hard for her to listen too long in the group. We spent some time together around her painting this afternoon. She layered her colors one on top of the other in a thick horizontal swatch, each new stroke achieving a new color and a thicker effect. Now we are beginning a kind of friendship; she knows I will be back on Thursdays.

The fact of my presence and my outsider status is as obvious as the color of my hair to Aleisha. She is not "color-blind" and she notices differences in her environment. It was with a sense of uncertainty that I told Aleisha about my white identity, because I felt she wanted to claim me somehow as belonging to what she knew. Aleisha showed her abilities as a curious researcher of her world, attempting to find the social

understanding that could give meaning to my presence, but did I do the same for her, for her world and community, and for the teachers in her life?

In recent educational literature and in state and professional organization standards teachers are cautioned to be sensitive to the needs and experiences of children from different cultures. In staff development, however, we often pretend to be color-blind, entering with the belief that we can form strong relationships with anyone around "teacher issues" that transcend different life experiences, issues that focus in a general way on children's needs, children's ways of learning, and the organization of curriculum and materials to support children's growth.

Cochran-Smith (1995) reminds us that "all viewpoints are historically, culturally, and socially located." I am suggesting in this paper that we need to develop the kind of staff development that takes into account the perspectives, often invisible, of the staff developers themselves. By attempting to develop a "color-conscious" perspective (Thompson, 1998) on my staff development relationships and working partnerships I am trying to make visible some of the values and expectations of my own white cultural practices. In order to form effective educational alliances my assumptions need to be carefully reexamined and placed in juxtaposition with the values and understandings of teachers of African American heritage whose socio-cultural/historical experience has been different from mine. In this paper I will present a reflection on my work as a staff developer, in the genre of teaching and education "stories," as an attempt to develop a critical personal narrative with implications for staff development practice (Burdell & Swadener, 1999).

The multiple contexts of the staff development project I was involved in were overlapping and exceedingly complex. I think all of us working on the project were excited by the kind of challenges our work posed and often overwhelmed by the conflicting demands of the job. In my field notes from the first year I write about feeling confused, with an overarching awareness of missed opportunity, frustration, and the sense of never gaining an appreciation of the whole picture. What I did see going on around me had an opaque quality, and I often realized I couldn't interpret what was really happening or the implications of those events.

In order to make sense of the situation, it was necessary for me to understand three interacting domains: first, some of the larger socio-politico-historical issues around urban school reform within this community, second, the specific purposes of our staff development project, and third, the much more the immediate shared terrain of the relationships forming between the teachers within the school and myself. This paper is an attempt to explore aspects of these different levels of context. After discussing the larger perspective of urban school reform, I will address the specifics of our staff development project and then explore the situated nature of my own experience in forming relationships with African American teachers within one school setting.

Background

Urban School Reform

In her book, Ghetto Schools, Jean Anyon (1997) has written about the plight of urban education, which on a statewide level has included for many years systematic underfunding of inner city school districts, coupled with increasing calls for

accountability and educational standards. The increased emphasis on testing and standardized test scores as the only measure of a school's effectiveness has led to years of top-down educational mandates that essentially disempower teachers as decision-makers, miring them in endless amounts of paperwork, weekly and monthly testing, and instruction aimed at basic, lower order skills (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Anyon, 1997; Oakes & Lipton, 1998). The number of school reform initiatives that have been introduced over the years continue to have little effect on the overall level of academic achievement as measured by tests, and appear to be ineffective in making large changes in individual teaching practices. Within too many urban schools teachers function as survivors, managing as best they can with minimal support from their supervisors and inadequate materials and classroom settings

Anyon (1997) documents the years of corruption and the " process of long-term larceny—the theft of almost every resource the cities possessed," that occurred prior to 1970 in many American cities. She also describes the consequences of poverty, racism and racial isolation that have undermined attempts at school reform in the last 30 years. She makes the powerful point that school reform initiatives have often overlooked the effects of the social context of political and economic "devastation" of inner cities, and that no reform movement in schools can work in isolation without addressing these underlying issues. Education and staff development cannot be seen as isolated learning opportunities, but are socially constructed in the larger framework of the surrounding historical and political realities at the end of the 20th century. In her view "economic and political decisions by others …have made the positions of current actors in central city

schools almost unbearable" (Anyon , p. xix). Our staff development project was situated firmly within this context of urban school failure and reform.

The project and the community

The circumstances surrounding our staff development project were compelling. The state had taken over control of this urban school district, universally seen as a case study in failure and corruption, to insure improvement in the academic performance of all students. As a major part of the restructuring attempt, many different reform projects were implemented throughout the district. Funded by private and public sources, these projects often competed for resources, used a variety of dissimilar approaches, and were seldom coordinated with each other. Our particular project was part of an attempt to restructure the city's early childhood classrooms. Our work was complicated by the fact that only a few classrooms were included in the first years, and the work of the project was often isolated from other teachers and instructional approaches within the same school. The lack of a strong unified vision from all administrators made our work especially challenging.

In spite of these systemic problems, our project's goal was clear-cut. We were to help individual teachers develop a more child-centered, constructivist approach to early childhood education. Our main staff development model was based on developing long-term mentoring relationships between staff developers and teachers. I was assigned to work at Carver Elementary School, located in the middle of the central city, in a predominantly African American community that had many pockets of serious poverty. As I went into the project I had few preconceived notions about how my work might

proceed, although I knew the importance of learning about the culture of the school community.

I lacked the specifics of the socio-politico-historical context of urban school reform described in Anyon's (1997) book, although I knew in a very general way, as most people living in the Northeast would have known, some of the history of urban unrest and poverty associated with this particular city. My early awareness began, as it does for most newcomers, with the visual immediacy of the physical world as I became a regular visitor to Carver School. The surrounding environment came as a surprise to me. My first impressions were of a general void, an absence of a community that presumably had been there for generations. There was a sense that large chunks of the soul of the physical and social space were, simply, missing. Most of the large housing projects had already been demolished, and there were virtually no stores or any other community buildings. There were very few trees. Even many of the substantial old stone churches were boarded up, with plastic sheeting blowing at the windows. Instead there were large expanses of empty lots that gave a sense of the earlier development that had scraped away the shape of the land—bare blocks of lots, so that you could see across several miles of the urban landscape, flat and moonlike, the short grass that covered the red earth glittering with broken glass.

As my colleague Denise Prince said, "It looks like people have just forgotten about these folks." Although the city was, in fact, going through a kind of renewal, and new town houses were slowly appearing in these empty lots, the sense of loss and abandonment was pervasive. Each week another old house would disappear to the demolition teams, and during my visits the last emptied multiblock housing project was

reduced to rubble. The school building was virtually the only community space left in this neighborhood, and its role was complex, both as a source of employment, as a focus of discontent from some local residents and from state regulators, and as a common experience for families who lived in this community. Within this school only a few teachers had been chosen (or assigned, as I later learned) to participate in our project, although the number of classrooms grew rapidly each year.

Relationship-Based Staff Development

Insider/Outsider Cultural Contexts

The staff development model in this project was based on mentoring through developing trusting relationships between the teacher and the staff developer, a model somewhat similar to that advocated by Stein et al. (1999). The idea of forming a collaboration that fostered collegiality and equality between the two participants suggests a form of transaction—a reciprocal relationship which affects each participant's understanding. But it is clear that in order for an effective transaction to occur, each participant has to fully comprehend the meanings the other party gives to the messages exchanged in the dialogue. In reflecting on the relationships and meanings elaborated in my staff development work, I now feel the need to investigate my own assumptions about communication and the ways relationships are formed between teachers and staff developers. I want to try to understand in much more depth the different experiences of communication and relationship that may have been part of the social and cultural context of my African American partners.

First let me state a disclaimer about the following discussion. I was assigned to work with teachers from many different backgrounds in this project. With some I developed successful relationships which promoted change in classroom practice. With others my attempt to build relationships and provide training was, in my opinion, a frustrating failure. Teachers of color were represented in both groups, and therefore I want to clarify that my attempts to analyze staff development relationships across racial groups are not emerging from a belief that African American and white teachers and staff developers cannot work together effectively or form effective alliances. Quite the contrary; there were many instances within our staff development work in which my colleagues, including African Americans, experienced similar successes and failures across different and similar cultural, class, and racial boundaries. But I have come to believe it is important for me, as a white staff developer, to be especially conscious of my own assumptions and values as they are reflected in the quality of the relationships I developed in this work. By looking more closely at those relationships that were problematic in my mind, especially those with African American women, I hope I can bring to light some of the assumptions I brought to the interchange.

How did my background and upbringing situate me in these relationships? How did I see myself, and how was I seen by others within a larger socio-historical context? Using the typology of cross cultural researchers described by Banks (1998), as a staff developer I would certainly be identified as an external-outsider, one who is "socialized within a community different from the one in which he or she is doing research." Because of this orientation, according to Banks (p. 8), "the external –outsider often misunderstands and misinterprets the behaviors within the community."

Although Banks (1998) captures some of the confusion and perplexity I often felt in this community, I had come to this staff development situation believing strongly in my ability to work with anyone. I had assumed that my past experiences and my commitment to social justice and equity would give me sensitivity to many aspects of cultural difference and to the particular issues of structural racism (Banks, 1995; Thompson, 1998) that affected my African American colleagues and the school community in which we worked. I grew up in the Midwest in a white middle class household in which social justice and racial equality were strongly held values. I have had and continue to have close friends and colleagues who are African American, and I spent many years teaching children from different racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. In my classroom settings I had worked hard to include the child's family in my work, and to acknowledge the family's perspectives, understanding and expectations of their children. I also worked for several years in an inner city arts program where I was one of the only whites among African American staff, children, and families, which gave me a kind of outsider perspective that I found both illuminating and unnerving. I had hoped and believed my compassion and good will would bridge any differences in background and would support my work with all teachers.

What did the African American teachers in the project bring to this partnership? How had their experience had been shaped by the particulars of this school and this community, and by their shared experience as African Americans? The teachers in the Carver school community had lived with all the issues of urban poverty and public disinterest that had plagued the school for generations (Gates & West, 1996). I imagine they had a variety of beliefs about why the schools had failed to educate the community's

children. And the teachers themselves had been blamed by everyone from the state to the local level for the specifics of this school's failure to such an extent that they were focused only on what "had to be done" for the principal, the superintendent, the state regulators. As one teacher said wearily to me, the newest in a string of outsiders who were brought in to "fix" her teaching, "Just tell me what to do and I'll do it."

In addition to their shared history within this school community, each teacher brought her own additional history of class, economic status, gender, and geographic and personal experience that had shaped her perspectives and values. Some of the African American teachers had grown up in this community, and still lived there. Others came from other circumstances, other communities. In the rushed atmosphere of staff development and school reform there was little time for me to explore and come to know about the variations in their own lives or their identification with the surrounding community, their views of the families or the circumstances of poverty in which so many children lived. However, it was important to examine the intersection of the individual teachers' lives with some of these larger societal issues in order to develop a clearer picture of their individual ethnic identity and their shared African American culture (Hecht, Collins, & Ribeau, 1993). In order to be effective in balancing the multiple contexts that converge in staff development work, it is important for staff developers to understand more fully some of the core values expressed through African American culture (Parham, White, & Ajamu, 1999). How had historical, cultural and political forces shaped the consciousness of these particular teachers who were both women and African Americans, and how was this consciousness different and similar to my own cultural understanding?

Hecht et al. (1993) describe all ethnic culture as "historically and ethnically emergent," always in the process of being co-created, maintained and changed by members of the culture. In African American culture, identity is thought to be expressed through a set of core beliefs and understandings that have served to buffer the effects of racism and oppression. Through the expression of core symbols related to their African heritage, such as interdependence and collectivism, uniqueness and individual style, positivity and emotionality, realness and direct experience, and assertiveness, African Americans have been able to maintain a communal space which provides them with a "sense of worth, dignity, affiliation, and mutual support" (Parham et al., 1999, p. 14). "Identity is defined by the individual and co-created as people come in contact with one another and the environment" (Hecht et al., 1993, p. 30). It has been a necessity for African Americans to envision themselves in ways that stand apart from the discrimination that has used race as a justification for inequality, to see themselves always from a "double-consciousness" perspective, first as they are in terms of their own reality, and second in terms of how they are seen by the dominant majority. (DuBois, 1903/1994; Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1999; Scheurich, 1993). It has been shown that European Americans see themselves as having a unitary cultural identity, even when they belong to overlapping cultural groups, while African Americans describe their identity as being always dual, encompassing both a social and a political component (Hecht et al.). The strong sense of belonging to a separate and authentic Afrocentric cultural entity has supported the emergence of positive self-esteem for individual African Americans, in spite of the racism which has surrounded them (Parham et al.; Hecht et al; Fordham).

There have been some attempts to analyze core values of white European American culture in terms of a different and sometimes opposing set of unified beliefs (Greenfield, 1994; Lynch & Hanson, 1998), and to examine the ways these values are privileged by their dominance and their apparent appropriation of what is seen to be normative in our society. Fine, Weis, Powell, & Wong (1997) have addressed the invisibility of white privilege in their book, Off White, giving examples of the ways that cultural norms of the dominant majority work in unacknowledged ways to maintain power and status. Although I was well aware of these ideas, especially in the educational domain, it was striking how difficult it was for me to actually make use of this information in my work with African American teachers, and to be conscious of my own cultural orientation. In the remainder of this paper I will attempt to unravel some of the beliefs that unconsciously guided my staff development work, and to place those ideas within the context of a study of the value orientations of African American women (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1994; Thompson, 1998; Fordham, 1996; Greenfield, 1994)..

Two central questions frame the analysis of the interpersonal relationships between the African American teachers and myself: In what ways do our differing value orientations around developmental and educational goals shape our ideas of pedagogy and our ability to form collaborative learning relationships? How could I have built upon the core symbols of African American culture to be more effective in my staff development work?

Differences in cultural perspective seemed to shape our respective understandings of two main areas of our work together. First is the very notion of a collaborative relationship, and the ways ideas and messages are communicated in such

relationships. Second is the early childhood educational model promoted in the project, with particular emphasis on the meaning of constructivist learning, caring and of choice within educational practice.

Relationships and communication

In retrospect, I did hold clear values and beliefs about the best way for teachers to develop new approaches to pedagogy in their classrooms. Based on my past experience, I believed that the best staff development took place when a group of teachers came together to share their practice in a collaborative and nonjudgmental manner. Only by forming a trusting and respectful relationship with each teacher did I feel I would be able to communicate new teaching practices, help them move toward implementation in their classrooms, and reflect together on the learning process and educational growth of the children in their classes. I knew from my own past experience, in support of Stein et al. (1999), that material presented in workshops or in writing was difficult to implement and that ongoing classroom support and modeling would be necessary to help teachers feel comfortable with new methods.

I did not question my personal style of relating nor did I reflect on possible variations in the ways I went about developing relationships with these teachers. Without thinking, I did what seemed natural to me, and hoped for the best. I was aware that I wanted to be seen as open and warm, accepting of others, nonjudgmental, that in the beginning my need to develop trust took precedence over imparting educational expertise. However, I did want to be seen as someone who had important information to convey, someone who was knowledgeable about classroom practice, who could help children become more successful in school, however that success was to be measured.

Our project promoted specific practices and a philosophy of early education which was not regimented or prescribed in a formal way. We focused from the beginning on a few alternatives to the traditional practices used by most teachers and brought in new materials to support these practices. My assumption in the beginning, based on my notes from this period, was that our staff development meetings should be conversations about new ways to do things in the classroom: Here is the way to set up your space, here is how to plan your schedule, here is the kind of activity to do when you are working on literacy skills. It was practical and concrete, it seemed related to the children's learning; in my mind there was a logical relationship between doing things this way and children's independence, motivation, academic and social growth.

Although my communication goals were clear to me, I grew increasingly frustrated at how little seemed to really get accomplished from one visit or meeting to the next. I couldn't seem to get to the issues that were uppermost for me, such as how to help students be engaged in learning activities more of the time. I listened to the many district-based problems that the teachers presented, which I had no power to change. But the issues of pedagogy that I had been hired to address seemed to drift away. This tendency seemed especially pronounced in my interactions with several of the African American teachers. It was not just that the teaching methodology I was proposing was unfamiliar to these teachers, or that they questioned its effectiveness and needed time and evidence to see its value (although of course this was also true), but there seemed to be something about the very context of the communication system itself that seemed to interfere with my attempts to make myself understood.

My understanding of relationship and communicative competence was embedded, of course, in my own cultural and ethnic experience. One of my basic assumptions was that the teachers would understand me no matter how I communicated. I had no reason to believe that my experiences of successful communication with other women, mostly white, in the education world was not normative. I was using the linguistic "register" of staff developer expert to teacher colleague, which was an implied part of my understanding of how communication in this situation should occur (Heath, 2000). My idea was that conversations about teaching were culturally neutral, and were a powerful way to build relationships through developing a shared identity as teachers.

However, according to Hecht et al. (1993) all communication takes place within a cultural framework, and cannot be seen as separate from the cultural envelope within which it has developed. In fact, "ethnic culture is constituted and created through systematic and patterned communication that is interpreted through a shared code." Conversation and relationship are key factors in creating and maintaining cultural identity, and the salient features of the communication system help define the core symbols of an ethnic group. My style of communication seemed to me to be a shared code for all of us to develop relationships and communicate, but I didn't consider the differences emerging from a distinctly African American communication system or how flexible this system has had to be in order to facilitate communicate with different ethnic groups, such as my own.

My field notes from this period show my struggle to analyze my own communication style, to make visible the kinds of communication patterns I used to interact with the teachers, both in one-to-one interchanges and in group meetings. I was

aware that my communication style was heavily dependent on nonverbal messages, on facial expression, gesture, body posture and positioning. I used these various means (mostly unconsciously) to convey ideas and to attempt to develop rapport. I also was attentive to these nonverbal messages in others, trying to figure out the mood and feelings of the listener, attempting to fit what I was saying to match that mood, trying to empathize, and to see how my message was being received. Perhaps because of an uncertainty about how I was being perceived, my ideas were often stated indirectly, or I used several different ways to try to say the same thing. I was ambivalent about how it would seem to the teachers if I assumed the role of expert in this situation, and I didn't want to undercut my attempts to develop an equitable collaborative relationship with them if I acted as though I had all the answers.

My impressions of the communicative style of the African American teachers at this time were also revealing. During our brief meetings together, one of the teachers, Ms. T., typically would begin talking and I would find it difficult to get into the conversation. It seemed to me that I could only participate as a listener. Her phrases and sentences flowed into one another and there never seemed to be a break for me to take a turn. Her only conversational openings for me were around direct requests for me to solve problems regarding materials or the conflicting expectations from the school district administration. Then there were other times when I was speaking and Ms. T. turned her body away, did not look at me, and I interpreted her expression and behavior as registering disinterest or perhaps disapproval.

How much of our problematic communication was in fact a result of different cultural communication codes?

African American Communication Patterns. Many researchers have pointed out patterns of communication in African American culture which are distinct from those in European American culture, and through which core symbols of a shared ethnic identity are expressed (Heath, 1983; Hecht, et al.1993; van Keulen, Weddington & DeBose, 1998). The core value of sharing, interconnectedness, and group endorsement can be related to the call-response pattern familiar in the preaching style of African American ministers, as well as in the nonverbal behaviors of frequency of touching, close interpersonal distance, and deep friendship and intimacy. Uniqueness and individuality are contrasted and combined with sharing through a sort of dynamic tension which is expressed in ritualized boasting, "doing the dozens," and other highly expressive and stylized verbal and nonverbal behaviors. African Americans value language use and a communication style that is based in the reality of lived experience, down to earth and genuine. In their discourse, events and actions are often portrayed as diunital, combining both good and bad, with positivity and resilience expressed through the emotional vitality of their language, their spirituality, and art. Finally, African Americans use an assertive verbal style which supports standing up for one's rights by using a loud voice, animated gestures, staring and other nonverbal postures of assertiveness (Hecht et al. 1993).

Cultural identity and affiliation for African Americans is also signaled by the use of the varieties of African American Vernacular English, used in different kinds of social and geographical contexts. Being linguistically competent for African Americans means that that they must be fluent in both African American Vernacular English and in Standard American English, and be able to switch from one linguistic code to another

depending on the social situation and the power structure of the larger society. (Delpit, 1995; Hecht et al., 1993; Ogbu, 1999; Smitherman, 1998).

The African American teachers at Carver school spoke Standard American English in their interactions with me and with the children in their classes. They were probably able code-switchers, and, as described in different research, they also changed many other aspects of their communication patterns when speaking with others who were not part of their culture (Hecht et al., 1993; Ogbu, 1999). Although they were able to adjust much of their communication to fit the demands of our relational situation, there were still a variety of barriers to our successful communication.

Intergroup Communication Differences. In retrospect it is possible to analyze some of the possible misunderstandings and varied interpretations which each of us brought to the relationship. According to Parham, et al. (1999), when African Americans interact with each other, patterns of relationship intimacy, closeness, touching, expressiveness, and interrelationships are prominent. However, African Americans frequently alter these same communication patterns when interacting with European-Americans, and their responses may be interpreted by European-Americans as aloof, or disinterested. Studies have described how European Americans in these situations take over more responsibility for the interaction, smiling, looking, and talking more in an effort to overaccommodate for what they perceive to be a communication breakdown. (Hecht et al., 1993). The description from my notes of my reliance on extensive nonverbal cues and interactions to build rapport seems to fit this finding closely.

Patterns of eye contact also appear to vary in different communication systems.

According to Hecht et al.(1993), African Americans look at their listening partner more when speaking and tend to look away when listening, whereas European Americans look at the speaker when listening and look away from their partner when speaking. Such a mismatch of expectation in eye contact may signal very different meanings to the participants. When Ms. T spoke, looking directly at me, I often felt her nonverbal message was a statement that I was not doing enough to attend to her needs. When she looked away as I spoke, it signaled to me her disinterest, whereas it may have been an example of a culturally-based rule that actually signaled respect. For Ms. T's part, she may have experienced my eye contact with her while I listened to her speak as intrusive or challenging, and my looking away as I spoke as dismissive of her.

These misunderstandings can grow out of different expectations of communicative competence. African Americans report several areas of concern which affect their ability to be successful in communication across ethnic groups. According to Hecht et al., in encounters with those from a different ethnic group, African Americans are sensitized to the possibility of negative stereotyping by their communicative partner, and react strongly to the direct or indirect ascribing of ethnic categories instead of acknowledging their individuality. Participants in a study of communicative competence suggested that some African Americans become very talkative or try to control the conversation in an effort to avoid negative stereotyping. Other methods of dealing with stereotyping are to avoid conversation altogether, or to become distant, act tough, and to not show emotion. Issues of acceptance, expressiveness and authenticity are also important to interethnic communication, but can take different forms. Verbal facility is valued; directness and being "real" are given high status. Lack of trust can lead to

relational breakdown, and in these situations African American participants become reluctant to disclose their real feelings in intergroup communication (Hecht et al, 1993; van Keulen, 1998).

Although I have no way of knowing whether these generalizations about African American communication concerns apply to the African American teachers with whom I worked, it is interesting to consider how these issues may have affected my ability to communicate effectively. In fact, throughout my first year of work, Ms.T. made it clear to me that she was having difficulty understanding what I was trying to say to her. She often asked for more clarity in my expectations for our work together. I realize how hard it was for me to be directive and clear in my discussion with her. I didn't want to be seen as "telling her what to do." Yet this very need to be seen as "nice," to be liked and accepted, may have contributed to the problem of communication between us. As Delpit (1988) says, I didn't want to be seen as expert because I was afraid it would in some way disempower her in her role as a teacher.

Hecht et al.(1993) suggest that one important component of successful intergroup communication for African Americans is to accomplish a goal together, to attain a shared outcome. Perhaps in her direct requests to me to solve some of the many problems she faced in negotiating with the district administration, Ms. T was actually trying to set a concrete goal for us to accomplish together. Because the philosophy for our project's educational approach was not clearly translated into specific teaching objectives that were prescribed in some sequential way, it may have been difficult for Ms. T. to clarify what we were working toward. In an attempt to be collaborative, I often asked her to direct me in how to best help her become a better teacher, while at the same time trying

to model and suggest classroom practices that were consonant with the project's goals. Since assertiveness and directness are valued in African American communication and culture, my continued hesitation to take an assertive posture or to give Ms. T. the opportunity to be assertive herself, may have contributed further to our mutual misunderstanding. During our interchanges, I was unable to draw upon a repertoire of communicative resources to adjust my message to better fit her needs, probably because I failed to consider that her communication codes and rule systems might have been different from my own. It seems clear to me now that I depended on Ms. T. to make all the adjustments needed to repair any breakdowns in communication (Hecht et al., 1993). Without mutual adjustment, our communication continued to be problematic.

Throughout this relationship I was unclear about the lines of authority with Ms. T. Was I truly a helpful "colleague" who could negotiate more materials and less administrative paperwork, or was I someone who had supervisory power over her, who could evaluate the effectiveness of her work and make recommendations about her to others in the system? My role was to change her teaching practice, a role supported by the authorities in her school administration, yet I was presenting myself as a pleasant person who wanted to be helpful, and this indirect and elliptical approach to our relationship must have been as confusing for her as it eventually was for me. By acting as though our relationship was an open, friendly interchange about teaching ideas and practices, was I actually manipulating Ms. T. and contributing to her sense of powerlessness? According to Hecht et al.(1993) feelings of powerlessness and fear of negative stereotyping are the key sources of discontent for African American in their communication with European Americans.

I did not want to think about my role as an authority with power over Ms. T., and did not really consider how she might have experienced my status as a white outsider who in reality was hired specifically to make changes in her teaching practice. In so many ways my work with Ms. T. and the other African American teachers in this school may have been replaying the power relationships that they had experienced in many other venues. As Thompson (1998) remarks, being aware of power as revealed in relationships is especially difficult "for those of us who are privileged enough not to notice the workings of power in our day to day lives" (p. 528). There was no doubt that my indirect communication delivered a message of hidden authority and unacknowledged power, which may have been especially irritating to women who had experienced the inequalities and power structure of racism throughout their lives.

Early Childhood ProgressiveEducation

Constructivism and Authority. Looking more closely at communication patterns and power relationships led me to consider other ways in which our staff development approach might have been at odds with key aspects of an African American value orientation. A second area of contested understanding occurred around the model of progressive early childhood education our project embodies. Our approach to early childhood education was grounded in the guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice outlined by professional organizations, and current early education literature (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, Williams, 1999). Although fully aware of the critiques of and adjustments to notions of "developmentally appropriate practice" over the last few years (Delpit, 1986; New, 1994; Phillips, 1994), the basic tenets of this approach remained fundamental to our staff development efforts, and were strongly supported by

the appointed superintendent and some of the administrators within the school district. Many of the staff developers in our project, myself included, had successfully implemented such approaches in a wide variety of school settings with young children from many different socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic groups. Although there were variations in our experience and individual styles, we all shared a belief in the effectiveness of these developmentally sensitive practices to support the learning and social/emotional growth of young children.

I was well aware of the distance between the Carver School's traditional methods of education and my own vision of what constituted an effective learning environment for young children. Of course I expected and tried to be sensitive to the teachers' resistance to change and their questioning of different educational practices. Much of our staff development training addressed how our basic tenets and practice could be adjusted to fit the context of the schools in this community. But my underlying assumption was that teachers would eventually see our methodology as powerful and liberating, for themselves and for the children they taught. My beliefs seemed to be supported by the new state educational standards, which became the focus of the district's educational goals during our project. Since the standards clearly supported the approaches, methods, and curriculum we were advocating, it was confusing to me when many teachers continued to question the value and effectiveness of this approach to classroom practice, and made very little progress toward the changes which were the goals of our project.

It seemed so clear to me that what I wanted for these children who were growing up in poverty was to have the same kind of classroom experience I saw in middle class schools in surrounding cities and suburbs. In Dewey's words, "What the best and wisest

parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children" (Dewey, 1900/1956). Yet I held an implicit assumption that "the best and wisest parent" was a universal version of a parent who looked like me. And that the vision I had of a caring, child-centered classroom community was a universal image of best practices that could be transferred with very little adjustment. I had evidence that such classrooms could be implemented in other settings, and I saw it happening with other African American teachers in some classrooms in the same staff development project.

How was my message received by the African American teachers whose practices I was attempting to change? What was their perspective on the goals and processes of education, and how had their views been shaped by the socio-politico-historical and personal experiences of their lives? Could or should their picture of the ideal early childhood classroom ever look like mine?

Audrey Thompson (1998) describes the Black feminist cultural model as being as "womanist" one, based on Alice Walker's use of the word "womanist." The Black womanist image projects a powerful, competent, and knowledgeable stance that demands respect and is comfortable taking charge. Although not true for all African American women, or for any individual African American woman within a particular cultural, geographic, socio-historical, or economic group, there may be some core cultural issues based on the experiences of many African American women which would be helpful for white staff developers to understand (Collins,1991; Thompson, 1998). The powerful, knowledgeable Black feminist stance mirrors the authoritative relationship between adults and children in the African American community that many observers describe (Delpit, 1988; Diller, 1999; Hale, 1994).

In every case the African American teachers with whom I worked valued most highly their ability to be in control of their classroom, to maintain order and to be obeyed. Their idea of teaching by and large reflected a transmission model, in which they imparted information to the children and the children took it in. A goal of my staff development work was to change that notion of "teaching as telling," based on my belief and experience that young children benefited from learning through active engagement with materials and real life tasks, rather than being told a set of facts.

Although many authors writing about best educational practices for African American children would support moving away from a "teaching as telling" model (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1994) there may be reasons based in African American experience for a different approach. It was clear for all the teachers, but especially for African American teachers, that raising children's academic achievement was their overarching goal, and this was not only because of the intense pressure to raise test scores from the state and district levels. I think the African American teachers knew the children in their classrooms would be victims of the kind of structural racism that had limited human potential in this community for generations, and it seemed to me they believed in the promise of education as one way to mitigate these conditions. The educational enterprise was not seen only as a way to develop democratic ideals of the society and to fulfill individual potential; in addition it was seen as a way of combating poverty and racism within and beyond the community. As Carol Brunson Phillips (1994) says, the educational goal for teachers is to "mediate the experience of African American children so that they become more proficient at exercising power over

their reality " (p. 148), to help them deal effectively with the particular sociopolitical context that defines their lives.

I wonder if for the African American teachers, the education of the children had a different kind of meaning, one that was deadly serious and suffused with the reality of their own experiences. The indirect methods of teaching and learning we were promoting may have seemed too remote from the material the children were supposed to be learning and for the dreaded state assessments in their futures. What would be the substance of learning if it were left to the child to construct it from his own experience? In her own community, according to Thompson (1998), the adult African American woman has often taken on the role of being the keeper of knowledge, the wise expert who passes on to the younger generation "the understanding and strategies they need to survive racism." African American teachers have often been able to provide the unique Afrocentric communal space which nurtures self-esteem while negotiating the disjunction between home and school (Fordham, 1996; Parham, 1999; Ogbu, 1999). For women who are used to taking charge, expecting them to move from the central role of dispenser of knowledge to one of "facilitator" may be not only counter to their understanding of how learning occurs, but also may serve to undermine their own sense of purpose, self-respect, and competence.

Caring . Much of early childhood practice is based on a concept of caring relationships based on the model of the private nurturing experience of feminist, specifically maternal relationships (Noddings, 1984; Shapiro & Nager, 1999). Many African American practitioners have embraced this model, but there are also reasons to consider how the idea of caring and nurturing may be different for some African

American teachers. Thompson (1998) suggests that for many African American women, home has not been the protected site for caring relationships that was mythologized for white women. In the past, many African American women have had to work outside their homes, often in white people's homes, and have had little opportunity to experience the isolated realm of familial privacy, thereby developing a different experience of what is nurturing for themselves and their families. In African American culture, caring and nurturing is seen as both a public and a private undertaking. The community at large, extended and fictive kinship groups, and churches accept shared responsibility for children's well being and nurturance. In addition to their child-rearing responsibilities, African American women have traditionally taken on prominent roles within their communities to promote social change and educational uplift. In the African American community, according to Thompson (1998), "Love and caring do not step back from the world in order to return to innocence, but step out into the world in order to change it" (p. 533). Private caring relationships with individual children are important and primary but are also seen in relation to the need to fight injustice to empower the larger African American community.

The more I thought more about these ideas, the more I realized that my own notions of caring and authority are inextricably tied to my white experience—the private sphere values, the sense of the family unit as a separate haven from the surrounding community, and a white female socialization pattern based on sensitivity to the needs of others, with those needs most often stated indirectly. I didn't really think about authority, perhaps because from my position within the dominant majority, I rarely needed to acknowledge other people's authority over me, or mine over other people. How different

from Thompson's (1998) description of the Black cultural model of womanhood, which values outspokenness, courage, not being afraid to offend, inquisitiveness and "being someone to reckon with." My image of caring and good schooling were inextricably woven together based on my own cultural patterns, and my ideas of collaboration and relationship grew out of reflective conversations with other teachers who shared my background. It remains a question whether my beliefs and understandings were congruent with those of teachers and students who had experienced a different world view in their lives.

It is not a coincidence that my problems in communicating reflected some of these different perspectives on authority and power, on the source of knowing, on what it means to care about children. In my world, caring is based on an individualistic model. As a teacher I learned to care and know about each child in my classroom, and used that knowledge to inform my understanding of the group. In my staff development work I had to restrain myself from putting the focus of my work on individual children, such as Aleisha, who so affected me. This attention to individual children's needs was a consistent tendency across staff developers in the first years of our project (Silin & Schwartz, 1999). Yet as I watched some of the African American teachers who ran their classrooms with authority and personal power, I had to acknowledge the sense of comfort and safety that many children seemed to experience in this setting. As Thompson (1998) asks, "What counts for caring?" The African American teachers were attentive to the needs of individual children but were also able to incorporate the individual within the larger needs of the classroom and community context. I am not trying to essentialize appropriate practice for African American children as being authoritarian, teacher-

directed, or group-centered. I am just trying to question the unthinking acceptance of a model of practice that judges such practices as inferior or lacking in sophisticated understanding. The core of good caring practice takes into account the multiple, socially-constructed meanings of care within different cultures and communities, and the varied histories that underlie the authentic teaching voice within each of us. Echoing Thompson (1998), it will surely be beneficial for educators to inform ourselves about the meaning of care and nurturance through different cultural lenses, especially if we want to truly understand the range of effective classroom practices.

Choice. A third feature of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education is the notion of allowing children to make some choices about their engagement in meaningful classroom activities. The ability to make choices is seen as a way of supporting a child's independence and self-organization as well as offering the opportunity to pursue individual interests. A major focus of my work with teachers was to help them develop learning centers in their classrooms as a shift from whole group instruction to more small group or individual experiences structured with some degree of autonomy for children.

The shift from a more traditional classroom organization to one based on learning centers and choices for children was a slow process for many teachers. However, it is clear that my own experience in school and in my personal and professional life has influenced my perspective on the central role of choice as a way to empower children as active participants in their own educational decisions and pathways. As a child and as an adult, I have had the freedom to make choices about my personal actions and about the environments in which my family and I lived and worked. In my classrooms, there were

many times when I could, figuratively, "close the door," and carry out my own decisions about teaching practice based on my beliefs about equity and excellence, without fear of bureaucratic consequences. It was my assumption that teachers in this school system had been given the opportunity to make choices within their classrooms as well. Adopting the new teaching approaches we were advocating seemed to me to be a choice that was supported by the school administration and that grew out of the teacher's personal preferences.

However, within the socio-political and historical context of this particular school system, choices about any educational decisions had been rare. Teachers had been "chosen" for this project to fit various purposes decided by the school administration. In many cases, teachers chose to participate as a means to receive much-needed classroom teaching materials and supplies. In other cases, teachers were forced to participate in the project, and their long history with school reform initiatives in the district shaped their overarching skepticism about the longevity or effectiveness of any attempts to change their teaching practice. Many teachers seemed to agree covertly with the one who said, "You will come and you will go, just like all the others, and we will still be here..." In truth, there was a special irony in our project's advocacy of choice for students in their classrooms, while many teachers were given no choice about their own participation in the project and few choices and little control over their own teaching decisions.

In retrospect, the importance of personal choice as part of early childhood educational practice may have posed different dilemmas for the African American teachers with whom I worked. Historically for many African American women, racism and oppression have limited their personal and professional choices, dramatically

realigning their experience of making decisions in terms of the situated reality of their lives. With values necessarily oriented toward pragmatism, survival, and the reaffirmation of personal dignity and respect, African American women have traditionally found creative and flexible ways to gain material and spiritual resources for their families and communities (hooks, 1994; Thompson, 1998; Parham et al.1999). It is partly their ingenuity in the absence of freedom and choice, which has so supported the image of sustenance and strength associated with the Black "womanist" perspective. In my work with African American teachers my assumptions that their experience with a range of possible choices was similar to my own is, in retrospect, another example of my own choice not to notice the privilege of my mainstream position. I was unaware of the actual choices that had been or were currently available to the African American teachers, either in their own lives or in the lives of their families. While racism and denied economic opportunity were factors that affected these teachers each day of their lives, the absence of those same factors in my life may have given me a distorted view of the universality of choice. Even within the staff development relationship, my belief about the choices these teachers were offered in their participation in the project replayed my own reluctance to confront the reality of "conscious and unconscious entitlements that exist ...[in] White America" (Parham et al., 1999, p. 137). In their classroom practice, did African American teachers question giving choices to children in part because such practices would misrepresent the realities of life for African American children growing up in a community where economic choices continue to be severely limited? Using choice and the ability to pursue one's individual interests in a classroom may reflect a belief that society at large mirrors those values and provides equal access and freedom of

opportunity to all of its citizens. African American teachers may have viewed me as hopelessly out of touch with the reality of their experience and the experience of the children who lived in this community. One had only to look at the urban landscape around the school, preserved beyond all reason or purpose, to see the narrow portal of opportunity and choice that wrenching poverty had made available to this group of people. If the Black feminist value orientation is one which honors knowledge and truth, based on reality as it is lived on a daily basis (Thompson, 1998), then my simplistic view of the possibilities inherent in choice-making, both for the teachers themselves and for the children they taught, must have seemed hypocritical.

Conclusion & Implications

These reconstructions of possible meaning as seen through the framework of an African American feminist perspective are meant to challenge my own assumptions and understandings that are based in white experience. It is not the "rightness" or "wrongness" of any particular pedagogical or staff development practice that I want to document , but instead it is to interrogate the ways I, and others with profoundly different experiences, have constructed the meanings and interpretations about these practices. In order to work across race, culture, and class boundaries, I have to see my actions, my communication style and my assumptions about educational practice from the positionality of my white experience, to be attentive to my tendency to not notice or to universalize my own perspectives. By avoiding the possibility of considering differing versions of what appeared to me to be the shared territory of classroom experience, I realize how much I have limited the range of my understanding, and the repertoire of my responses and communication styles. My unexplored experience as part of the white

culture can act as a screen to shield me from imagining different scenarios, different interpretations, different ways to be an educator who is always "contextualized within the framework of generational family experience" (hooks, 1994, p.).

Perhaps it is only through comparing what we know with ideas developed from a different perspective that makes our own beliefs and practices visible to us. In Stein, et al.'s (1999) discussion of a new model of professional development, they stress the importance of teachers collaborating with outside consultants. "The key is establishing trusting relationships between practitioner and outside experts in which they work together on problems of practice by bringing different kinds of expertise to the table" (p. 240). This paper is an attempt to explore some of the different kinds of expertise that African American women might bring to the table about different forms of collective identity, learning and communication across ethnic groups. We need a much more nuanced understanding of what it means to develop collaborative and respectful relationships across ethnic boundaries and situational factors which can successfully communicate shared meanings about teaching practice.

As we have seen in this paper, a "simple" conversation is always embedded in cultural expression and may take on varied interpretations that impede or support real communication. I have tried to explore which aspects of my communication style and value orientations may have had a negative impact on my ability to form collaborative learning relationships with African American teachers. How could I have built upon the core values of African American culture to be more effective in my staff development work?

African American communicative competence values expressiveness, acceptance, authenticity and understanding. In staff development work, there is always the sense that time is money, and I realize my goal was to get down to business in my conversational exchanges. I did not anticipate the time needed to really get to know one another, to share the personal, emotional, and expressive parts of ourselves. I didn't acknowledge the importance of personal authenticity as a way of developing trust, and I held myself apart in many ways, with a professional focus on classroom practice and our reform initiative. I realize how embedded in my own cultural tradition are these issues of privacy, separation of professional and personal, the habit of compartmentalizing my work and life.

Traditionally, African American women have been respected members of their communities, embodying key values of authority, knowledge, and assertiveness. In building relationships with African American women I needed to attend more directly to issues of authority, power, and responsibility as they were represented in our work and in the larger socio-political context. Acknowledging my respect for the knowledge and compassion that African American women bring to the work of school reform, it is important to give them authority in the staff development work when possible. A striking example of this occurred with Ms. T., who was very effective as a spokes person for our project when given the role of representing the school in a cross district planning group, even as she continued to express her ambivalence regarding the project in her conversations with me.

A final key issue that may affect communication with some African American partners, is the notion of goal attainment, the ability to achieve a desired outcome through

communicative exchange. For some teachers the ability to conceptualize and carry out a specific goal is the major factor in successful communication. Our project's approach to staff development did not fit this clear-cut expectation.

The method of staff development in our project, as stated above, was to develop relationships and model flexible strategies and developmentally appropriate approaches to early childhood curriculum and learning. We were trying to change basic ways of thinking about children, and we deliberately eschewed specific guidelines or step-by-step instructions. As one of our staff said, "...it is not the particulars of how or what you teach but a fundamental understanding of who children are and how they learn." We felt we were "helping teachers look beneath the surface to the developmental structures that characterize [the project's] classrooms..." (Silin & Schwartz, 1999, p. 20). Many teachers, African American as well as others, felt empowered by the flexibility and the focus on growth and learning that our staff development model embodied. However, other teachers were unclear about what our purposes were, and felt as if they were not included in the conversation in ways that supported successful communication.

If the desired outcome of our school reform project is to improve educational achievement of African American children, to help them "become more proficient at exercising power over their reality" (Phillips, 1994, p.148), then the ways to achieve that goal may need to be clearly articulated and operationalized in a manner that gives everyone access to a similar set of understandings. Moving toward a goal may need specific guideposts, well-described, which are built upon small, achievable, successful experiences in classroom practice. For some African American women, who value and are grounded in the everyday reality of their lives, "looking beneath the surface [at]

developmental structures," may seem to be a very roundabout route to their desired goal of improved academic performance. Whose developmental structures are we discussing here? Are issues of authority and independence, caring, and the ability to make choices represented through the lens of different cultural identities? And have we addressed the developmental needs of the teachers themselves, the need for well-structured and systematic approaches to educational change that acknowledge a variety of learning styles and a variety of background experiences. There is no doubt that we are all working toward the larger goals of rethinking educational practice in fundamental ways, but especially when we are working across boundaries of race and ethnicity, we see that the substance and effectiveness of the conversation depends on being attentive to different culturally expressed needs and values.

In communities where poverty is the norm and power has been systematically denied, schools can be one avenue for change and empowerment (Darling-Hammond, 1997), but if outsider staff developers are to work alongside the teachers, students and families of these communities, there must be more attention to the ways staff developers themselves have internalized socially constructed racial meanings and categories, and more ways to consider the different world views of their partners to understand the kinds of prior knowledge, beliefs and experience that makes each setting unique (Banks, 1995). Not all urban settings are the same, not all African Americans have similar beliefs about education and child-rearing, and each school has its own culture that requires flexible approaches toward the change process. As Wells (1999) suggests, there is no universal in the postmodern world, and our staff development strategies must reflect the enormous complexity and the rich possibilities that differing perspectives provide.

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